
Title: The Travels of Fedoso

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The Travels of Fedoso

Part 4

Volume 41

Behind a pockmarked, grey
rock wall,
The mamluk's manor
wrapped around
A swath of cypresses and
shade
And water trickling from
an urn.
My first night in that
gloried town,
The wali called upon our
house;
All silks and spice, with
tiny hands
He stretched to fondle
every thing.
Upon my master's
gauze-hemmed bed.
The two of them ate
figs and cream,
The while appraising me
with leers
And laughing at my
abject state.
I quaked with rage and
fear and grief,
And when their moistened
fingers jabbed
My nether belly, I
succumbed,
Upset the kettle, scales
and tray.
My swoon was lifted by a
splash
Of lukewarm tea. "A
windlashed boy!"
Kayal pronounced and
broadly smirked--
"Not worthy of the
Udar's lust."

They threw me out and
tossed a pouch
That landed near me with
a chink;
Inside, six shekels slid
about--
They comforted my
injured pride.
Within the lamplit
corridor
Two figures lurked, then
slipped away.
One was Kayal's daughter,
Anis:
She froze me with her
raptor's gaze.
Three days later, I was
summoned--
Hiyla, servant to the girl,
A hunched old woman,
drab and veiled,
Sent me to the
marketplace.

To the Beggars' Sook I
hurried,
There to purchase for
the crone
Several fortunes from a
seer
Capable in letterwork.

When the gaunt magician
saw me,
Right away, three scripts
he pulled;
He tallied with his cloudy
vision
Weird designs the
shadows drew.
"Tell the one who sent
you hither
Hoods and cloaks cannot
conceal
Deformity abhorred by
nature--
God's clairvoyance bares
deceit.
"To her mistress: what
she longs for
Now is present, near at
hand;
Tonight, the star al-ghul
will guide her
To the haunted crypt of
kings.
"As for you, here is my
warning:

At the ready you must
be
Lest a secret foe
destroy you--
Here's the only remedy."

In his palm he placed a
splinter,
Worn brown needle made
of wood,
Ordinary, yet beguiling,
What it was I
understood.

Money freed from its
confinement
Clattered in his other
hand;
The leather purse I had
just emptied
Opened for the sacred
shard.
That night, I tensely
searched the compound
For the hag that sought
the runes;
Finally, I tried her
chambers,
Tucked away below the
vaults.
My voice there
echoed--no rejoinder...
Shadows bent by
candlelight
Shifted up and down the
ceiling--
I felt the chill of peril's
vise.
Then I heard a scratchy
murmur
From a niche carved high
above;
I climbed a creaky ladder
to it,
Tugged upon a velvet
drape.
Hidden there, a sight
horrific:
Head preserved in oily
glaze,
Skin like that of
shrivelled currants,
Eyebrows melded in one
wave.
And beneath their hairy
archway,
Orbs like glacial globes
peered out--

Lidless, thoughtless,
lifeless, soulless,
Witnessing a ghostly play.

From the ladder's rungs I
tumbled,
Stumbled out the cellar's
door,
Raced across the
moondrenched courtyard,
Quailed within my bunk
alone.
Later, as I edged near
slumber,
Birdlike shrieks tore
through the air;
Bounding to my master's
haven,
I beheld a dismal scene.

There he lay, all strength
abandoned,
A deathly pallor on his
face;
A rubied hilt extended
toward me,
Where its blade had
struck his breast.
The wali's dagger--I had
seen it
Bouncing on its owner's
hip;
Yet its presence was a
puzzle--
The governor rested far
away.
I ran to find a guard to
aid me,
But I found Anis instead;
Heedless of my
indications,
She rebuked me, and she
said:

"Come, we need your
mute devotion,
Someone who can wield a
sword,
Someone who will not
reveal us,
I own you now that he is
gone."
So I followed her, that
elf-girl,
Slender shred of youth,
but hard;
With her elder maid we
traveled,

Once again on roads I
trod.